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THE BOOMERANG IN ANCIENT BABYLONIA

By JAMES B. NIES

IN Germany last summer my attention was drawn to a recent supplement of *Kosmos*, issued in the form of a monograph on the physical geography of the world during the several geological epochs.¹ Maps showing the surface of the earth at each period form an interesting part of the little volume. By these maps it is shown that continents now separated by vast oceans were once united.

However firmly we may believe this to have been the case, we must admit that the matter, at present, floats in an atmosphere of theory. The distribution of animals and other living creatures may offer, here and there, a thread of evidence. Unusual artifacts, in places widely separated, may point to a common source; though artifacts of almost similar character are best explained by psychological response to similar needs the world over in all ages. There are, however, at least three objects which originated in a remote past, that would seem to require, in each case, a common source and to which the argument from psychology is not applicable. One of these is the cosmic *step-pyramid*, found in Egypt,² Asia,³ and America,⁴ the same in appearance and purpose. Another is the *swastica*, or sun symbol, found in Europe, Asia, and America. The third is the *boomerang*, found in ancient Egypt⁵ and modern Australia. A weapon similar to it is found in northeastern Africa and southern India, and there can scarcely be a doubt that it was once

¹ Wilhelm Bölsche, *Festländer und Meere im Wechsel der Zeiten*, Stuttgart, 1913.

² Wm. Flinders Petrie, *Ten Years' Digging in Egypt*, p. 141 et seq.

³ Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands*, pp. 459-469. Hommel, *Geographie*, p. 126.

⁴ E. G. Squier, *Peru*, pp. 130-133. Joyce, *South American Archæology*, pp. 142, 179. Max Uhle, *Pachacamac*, chap. xx.

⁵ Erman, *Ägyptisches Leben*, pp. 322, 329; also *Grammatik*, p. 310, no. 6. Prof. William Max Müller is authority for the statement that boomerangs were not used as war weapons in Egypt after 2000 B. C., but for hunting birds they were used there much later.

known on the American continent, the obtuse-angled rabbit-sticks of the Hopi of Arizona and Gabrieleño Indians of southern California being similar in shape and characteristics.¹ In such legends as "Coyote takes Arrows from Owl" we have also a vestige of the use of the boomerang.²

It is not my purpose to present a paper on the boomerang, but to show, from the evidence of a cuneiform sign and its meanings, given in the Assyrian texts, that the boomerang was known in Babylonia not to the historic but to the prehistoric aborigines that first settled in Shumer and Akkad. The interest of this matter lies in the fact that, if we can thus reach back into prehistoric times in the case of one such sign, we may hope for information of value to anthropology from other signs as well and from other ideographic languages such as the Chinese, the Egyptian, the Hittite, and the Aztec.

In order that there may be no doubt as to what is meant by the word boomerang, a distinction, followed by a few words of explanation, will here be in place. We must distinguish between the boomerang and the throwing-stick. The latter was, perhaps, in universal use among prehistoric men and is found practically everywhere among contemporary primitives. It assumes various forms from a plain club-like stick to a hammer, and, when thrown, it does not return.

The return-boomerang, on the other hand, is an implement made of a single piece of wood, in a form that varies from a parabola to an obtuse angle. The upper side must be convex and the lower flat. Northcote Whitbridge Thomas, in his article on this subject in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, says they are so modeled that the thickness is about one-sixth of the breadth, which again is one-twelfth of the length, the last varying from 6 inches to 3 or 4 feet. In Australia the return boomerang is always curved at an angle of 90° or more, but the angle may vary from 70° to 120°. The weight also varies from 4 to 12 ounces, but 8 ounces may be regarded as the average weight.

¹ F. W. Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians*, pt. 2, p. 348.

² Goddard, *Apache Texts*, 27, page 225.

Thomas states that the arms have a skew, being twisted two or three degrees from the plane, while the ends are raised above the plane of the weapon, and adds that "the peculiarity of the boomerang flight depends mainly on its skew."¹ It is thrown with concave side in front, and goes in a straight line, with a whistling sound, some 30 or more yards, with nearly vertical rotation. Then it inclines to the left, lying over on the flat side, and, rising in the air, after describing a circle of 50 or more yards in diameter, it returns to the thrower.

In Berlin last summer I met Erman, the Egyptologist, and asked him whether he had, in the museum, any specimens of Egyptian boomerangs. He said, "Yes, several, but they do not return." I later saw these and found them to be a variety suitable for hunting birds. In his *Ägyptisches Leben* he has an illustration of a scene taken



FIG. 1.—Egyptian boomerang from Gurneh, XVIII Dynasty or earlier, in the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

from a papyrus in which a bird hunter is actually using a return-boomerang. There can, therefore, be no doubt that it was known. Through the courtesy of Dr Lithgow I was able to examine a specimen that came from Gurneh in Egypt and is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was bought from a native in 1911 and seems characteristic. It is slightly flat on one side, convex on the other, and has a rather wide angle, as the accompanying illustration (fig. 1) will show. It weighs 6 ounces, is 4.3 cm. wide, 1.3 thick at the middle, 54 cm. round, 46 cm. across, and the arch is 13.5 cm. high. The angle I have not taken. I think this, like the specimens in Berlin, is a bird boomerang, and I hope Dr Lithgow will have a replica of it made for testing purposes. It does not seem to have the skew or

¹ Illustration in article "Boomerang," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed.

the elevation of 2° to 3° at the points, which Thomas states are necessary to give the weapon its peculiar flight, but then one will find that these characteristics are also wanting in some of the boomerangs from Australia in the American Museum of Natural History in New York.¹

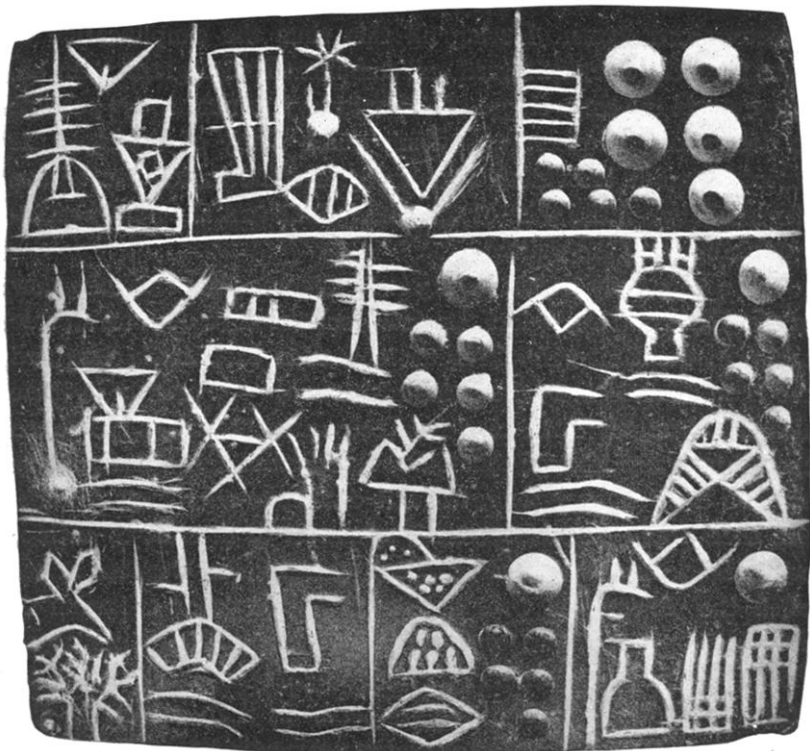


FIG. 2.—Archaic Babylonian tablet, known as the Hoffman Tablet, in the library of the General Theological Seminary, New York.²

The question we have now to answer is, Did the boomerang exist in ancient Babylonia, or, rather was it, at any time, used by the race known as Babylonians, or Sumerians?

¹ Mr Van Shrum, an expert maker and thrower of boomerangs, during his recent engagement at the Hippodrome in New York examined this specimen and said it was peculiarly suited for bird hunting and would return, if thrown high, even though it lacks the skew.

² For translation and discussion see article by Ogden and Barton in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 23, p. 19 ff.

Hidden in many of the highly conventionalized signs of the Assyrian language are pictographs that trace back to a remote antiquity. Babylonian writing ceased about 50 B.C. From that date backward there is an unbroken series of historical inscriptions to Ur-nina whose date is conservatively fixed as 3000 B.C., but may be much earlier. Before him are six or seven kings and patesis of undetermined dates. During all this time the simplification of signs from the often awkward and complicated pictograph went on, but, even in the early stages of the writing, it is not always possible to determine the pictographs from which many of the signs are derived, and it is evident that a considerable period must have elapsed between the time of the inscriptions and the purely pictographic stage of the writing.

To a very early period belong such tablets as the Hoffman, now in the General Theological Seminary collection (fig. 2), an archaic tablet in the University Museum collection in Philadelphia, and the Blau monument in the British Museum. Apparently in these also the signs are to be read in a conventional way as ideograms and phonograms, though some have ventured to date these as early as 6000 B.C. They belong, without doubt, to a prehistoric time, and their study becomes properly a matter of interest to anthropologists as they reveal the practices, utensils, and weapons in use when the pictographs were in the earliest stage of evolution as written language. The type of Babylonian writing familiar to most of us is the cuneiform or wedge-sign type, but there is an earlier linear form which alone appears on such tablets as the Hoffman and on the majority of the seal cylinders. This linear was *engraved* on stone or other hard substance, and this was evidently the type from which the cuneiform was derived. It is clear that the linear originated in a different environment from the cuneiform. A primitive people uses the material to supply its common wants that is near at hand. The linear form originated where stone abounded. Babylonia is, however, a land without stone, but with abundance of clay. Making signs on clay is a different thing from engraving them on stones, and the inventors of the pictographs, after settling in Babylonia, hit upon the method

of emphasizing the beginning of lines by means of wedges, to prevent the obliteration of lines on the soft clay.

In Assyrian inscriptions the signs have become so conventionalized that the original pictograph is rarely recognizable. This is the case in the sign we are considering, whose name is *gešpu*,

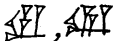



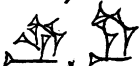






	Neo-Babylonian. Clay's list, No. 166.	500 to 50 B. C.
	Assyrian.	1100 to 650 B. C.
	Kassite. Clay's list, No. 196.	1800 to 1100 B. C.
	First Dynasty of Babylon. Ranke's list, No. 177.	2200 to 1800 B. C.
	Ur Dynasty.	2400 to 2500 B. C.
	Gudea.	2600 B. C.
	On mace-head of Sargon:	2800 B. C.
	Eannatum.	2900 B. C.
	Ur-Nina.	3000 B. C.
	Proto-Elamite. Sheil's list, No. 932.	Prehistoric.
	Boomerang.	

FIG. 3.—Development of the sign *gešpu* from the pictograph of a boomerang.

whose values are *ru* and *šub*, and whose meanings point to the boomerang. Cuneiform signs usually have a name, values, and meanings.

Figure 3 shows the development of *gešpu* from the latest back to the earliest times. This makes it clear that the sign could have been originally a picture of a boomerang.

When now we turn to the meanings for this sign, found in various

Assyrian vocabularies and bilinguals that have come to light,¹ we find such as throw, cast, strike, be in violent motion, down, destroy, finish, end, also turn, return, turn aside, separate, decide, portion, a bow, prostrate, overthrow, fall, especially *nāparshudu*, to flee, deviate, i. e. to bend in running. As Barton, who thinks the sign had its origin in a bow, remarks, "From an extension of the idea of throwing or casting came the idea of giving," found in such words as *sharagu*, to give. All these meanings can be derived from some phase in the action of a boomerang and its effects, and, when this is considered in connection with the earliest pictographs, the argument seems conclusive. In fact there is no other object conceivable from which all the meanings given could be derived.

In closing, I may say that little conclusive archeological evidence of the existence of the true boomerang in Babylonia has come to light. The object in the hand of Eannatum,² the sickle-like weapons on the shoulders of Ishtar that appear on seals,³ and the weapon of Ramman⁴ on the boundary stones, may, however, be intended as such.

The Sumerians evidently ceased to use the boomerang when they changed from a forest environment, where wood could always be found for making the weapons, to the plains, remote from all forests, in southern Babylonia. When that was we do not know—it was probably not in historic times. One thing is certain from such a sign as *ru*, and that is, that a written language, in this instance, began its process of evolution in prehistoric times.

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¹ Geo. A. Barton, *The Origin and Development of Babylonian Writing*, pt. II, no. 69, p. 34.

² *Stele of Vultures*, illustration in King, *History of Sumer and Akkad*, facing p. 124.

³ *Seals of Ishtar*, in Ward, *Seal Cylinders of Western Asia*, chap. xxv.

⁴ William J. Hinke, *A New Boundary Stone*, fig. 11, no. 16.